

Aikido Politics and a Sustainable Northwest

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I want to thank all of you for the work that you do. You don't have to do this stuff, but you do, and it makes a big difference. And you work really hard at it. They don't give Nobel prizes for ecological restoration or conservation biology. They don't have Emmys or Grammys or anything else for your profession but they ought to. Because the work that you are doing is second to none in its importance over the long run.

Now this far into the conference I don't need to spend very much time talking about the problems. You've already heard it in small pieces, big pieces, one plenary, lots of posters. Folks, we're in a pickle. Folks in this room have documented just the extent to which we're kind of in a pickle here. We're in a pickle all over the world, and we're in a pickle around Puget Sound and the Georgia Strait and the adjoining waters, and in the watersheds that drain into those bodies of water. We're also in a pickle in the somewhat larger region.

That's the focus of my work, and I need to define that really quickly since any statistics that come out of my mouth—and they tend to do that when I don't have anything original to say—refer to this larger region, not to the bioregion that we're focused on in this conference today. That region stretches from southeast Alaska down the coast that is (or once was) covered with coastal temperate rainforests all the way down into northwestern California and then inland from the Pacific as far as the headwaters of all the rivers that flow through those forests: the great biological region that encompasses British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, Idaho and parts of neighboring states.

I'm not going to go into very much about THE problem. But let's at least define it. Okay? Through the industrial economy and its massive and miraculous workings, each of us in the room, like all other North Americans, consumes on average our body weight each day in natural resources--resources taken from farms and forests, from mines, fisheries and grasslands. That doesn't count the water: three to four thousand gallons a day per person that go, much of it, into irrigation but into other uses as well. Nor does it count the emissions of air and water pollution: only about eleven ounces per person per day of regulated air and water pollutants, but that adds up. There's 365 days in a year, 15.5 million people in the Pacific Northwest. It also doesn't count the greenhouse gasses that we emit, most of which comes from burning fossil fuels. You have to add in another body weight per person per day for our impact. So we're a big deal.

My friend Bill McKibben uses a metaphor. It's like each of us has trailing behind us this enormous Macy's balloon, like in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade in New York where they carry those enormous balloons floating along. Each of us has this huge balloon of our emissions bobbing behind us.

The population of us here in the Northwest, as in the world at large, is increasing. Here in the Northwest, in particular, it's growing faster than in North America overall, about 50 percent faster than the North American average and about a third faster than the world rate of population increase. That means that if there were box scores for world population, we'd be up towards the top with a lot of third world countries. We're leading India, we're neck and neck with Egypt, we're gaining on Ecuador, in population growth. Our fleet of motor vehicles is growing in pace with population. The good news is it's not growing as fast as it was until the early 1990s. It's merely keeping up with population growth now. What is changing is the composition of that fleet. As the economy of the Pacific Northwest moves rapidly out of extracting, processing and shipping bulky commodities, timber, fish, minerals and so on, our vehicle fleet is moving equally quickly away from passenger cars and toward trucks. Apparently it's no longer to carry the bulky commodities that we are no longer producing but to carry our stuff back from Costco. Or carry our gear, our recreational gear to the mountains. Or maybe just to carry our egos around the suburban subdivisions

that we inhabit. But by about 2003 the region will have more trucks than cars, which will mean that we will have to switch the generic term from “car” to “truck.”

When I was in Central America in 1986, this guy in this tiny little village that grew maize and sugar on this little island said to me *Tu tienes tu propio “pick up”?* (“You got your own pickup?”) He had this vision of everyone in America having their own pickup and I was like, “no, no, no. I don’t have a car, but most people don’t drive pickups. It’s not like in Marlboro ads.” But if I ever go back I may have to say, “Well, I don’t, but most people do.”

But I digress. The building stock in the region is also keeping up with population, or growing a little bit faster than population because the number of households in the region is growing even faster than the number of people. Households turn out to be more important than sheer population numbers because the basic unit of consumption for the highest impact goods and services are groups of people who live together. Your house, your car, your appliances, and so on, and energy, household water use are growing as a result of this increase of the building stock, vehicle stock, and people stock.

We are developing a God-awful amount of our landscape into new homes and office parks and so on. In the Northwest—overall—at last count it was about 10 acres per hour. (In my notes here I wrote 10 hours per acre, and the other night I did it the other way around. That’s kind of funny. You’re supposed to make jokes when you’re speaking, so if anyone can think of a good joke at any time, just butt in. Just stand up. I will spare you the knock-knock jokes that my 7-year-old daughter tells me. Okay.)

So there’s just this massive juggernaut of us and there’s two ways to view it. The traditional way to view it for people in my position—environmental Paul Revere—is to cry, “it’s terrible; it’s awful.” Which of course it is, because it’s leading to things like the endangerment of the totemic species of our place—the salmon—and many, many other species, and the ecosystems that they hold; and the emissions of climate changing gases; and 250-odd synthetic chemicals that each of us has, on average, metabolized into our bodies right now, *most* of which are *probably* benign.

But also you can view this as, “Wow, we are an amazing life form. It’s miraculous what we’ve created.” Just in the last few hundred years this extraordinary flourishing of people and culture and language and skill and knowledge and new technologies and so on... This is amazing stuff that’s going on. And so I want to rejoice in it even while I’m saying we’re in a pickle. Because we have to transform this enormously productive, prolific, creative, life form into something that can stick around for a long time and doesn’t just do like an algae bloom in our nearshore waters.

I guess I could probably extend the algae bloom metaphor here. Does that work? Okay, all right. Sometimes when I speak to business groups, there are a lot of suits. My pathetic excuses for formal wear don’t go over too well. And there I try to use bottomline metaphors a lot, but here we’ll keep it biological.

So this Pacific Northwest region, despite the phenomenal growth of the human enterprise, remains what I like to call the greenest part of the richest civilization in history. We still have many of our ecosystems — particularly high up in the mountains but in other places as well—intact enough that restoration is conceivable. We have a very informed and educated populace with a strong commitment to conservation, traditions of innovation in the public sector and the private sector, and we have an identity in the Northwest that we are a place defined by the richness of nature. So if we can’t reconcile ourselves with this place, then it’s unlikely that anyone anywhere can. But if we can do it, we will set an example for the world.

The mission of the Northwest Environment Watch is to be a research center for this place, identifying ways that we can better reconcile ourselves with the landscape. We pursue it through a bunch of different research and outreach programs, most of which center ultimately around one book or another. (And my brief commercial message will be over I promise in about 12 seconds.) There are 11 of them. I brought no paper to leave with any of you who are interested in following up on any thing. This is a paperless presentation. If you do want to follow up on anything the way to do it is to go to <http://www.northwestwatch.org> and there you can see information of all the publications that we’ve done and the programs. And you can badger me about all of the facts that I got wrong and how wrong headed

and foolish I am about many things. You can also see that there are currently postings for two research job positions for all of you government employees who feel underworked and overpaid. I would really encourage you to check it out. Actually for a nonprofit, we pay pretty well. But anyway, okay, my 12 seconds of commercial message are over.

All around us are people who are responding to the pickle we're in and doing amazing things. Outside these walls, there are thousands and thousands of other folks sprinkled around our region who are doing amazing things, crafting viable alternatives to unsustainable practices, conceiving of different ways of doing things. But the scale of the challenge that we face is such that we need to find leverage. We've got to find changes that bring more than marginal improvements, because everything that we are doing right now is not turning things around. So we've got to be looking for the chances, the big chances, to catapult the status quo to the next level of sustainability.

I've been thinking a lot about leverage in the last year, and I'm going to try something out on you today . . . This is the first public use of some of this information and based on your reactions (we're secretly videotaping each of you...we're going to be watching your facial expressions), we will either use this or not use it in the future. I want to talk about Aikido because, as it turns out, Aikido may be the discipline, the human discipline, that makes the greatest use of leverage. Mechanical engineers do it a lot, other engineers do as well. High tech startup companies always talk about leverage. But I don't think they really know what the word means.

Aikido is a martial art out of Japan. It's pretty new; it was only founded in 1942, and it's the subtlest of the martial arts. It's the least violent, the most passive of the martial arts. In Aikido, you never meet the opponent's attack full on. You don't meet force with force. Rather you try to find ways to deflect the energy of the attack, rendering it harmless or, even better, turning it to a positive end not only for you but also for your assailant.

An Aikido master will aim to improve the health of his opponent while he's subduing him or her. So it's a whole lot of avoiding and then using leverage on the weak points in the opponent's anatomy, using the opponent's own momentum to undo his or her bad intention. Lots of throws, lots of pins. And if there are lessons in it, it's that the key things are understanding your opponent exceptionally well, understanding the anatomy, understanding the momentum, so that we can meld with that and find the changes that will turn things to our advantage.

In a little bit more than a month, Northwest Environment Watch's next book will come out, and in it we identified 24 Aikido throws. Call it Aikido politics for the Northwest. I'm not sure they all work, this is sort of a first draft. It took the founder of Aikido a lifetime to perfect the art and he had already studied six or eight martial arts before that, so this is the first draft and I'd be excited to hear your reactions to it. I'm going to try out a few of these with you today, just three or four. Looking at the time, maybe two or three, but the metaphor seems to me to work pretty well, because the Northwest's body of tax codes, budgets, land use plans, insurance regulations, medical rules, environmental standards, sediment guidelines—this anatomy of rules is incredibly powerful, operating silently in the background of people's everyday lives. It exerts tremendous leverage over our decisions, and so if we can find the right places to make changes then we can have more than incremental improvements.

Example number one. In Aikido there is a throw called the *entering throw*. Someone lunges at you, you cozy right up close to them so that you are inside the range of the punch, so close that they can't hurt you anymore, and you literally hug them and spin them around. They are already coming at you, and you embrace them in a certain way that brings them off balance and uses their energy to defeat them.

In Aikido politics an analogous reform would be pay-by-the-mile car insurance. The automobile is, of course, one of the principal antagonists of environmental quality, at least in its current manifestation, the internal combustion technology. It enables sprawl; releases a tremendous amount of air and water pollution—the crud seeping off of parking lots and all that...climate-changing gases. Automobile accidents are the leading cause of death among Northwesterners between 2 and 24. The automobile is the environmental equivalent of cigarettes for public health. This is the serial killer amongst us. It's also, of

course, one of the most useful devices. That's why automobiles are so widely used, but the way that we pay for driving is kind of crazy. We pay almost all of it in lump sums. Besides your fuel costs, everything else is in great big checks. So it's kind of an all-you-can-eat meal plan, and if anyone has ever been to an all-you-can-eat restaurant you probably can attest that you kind of over do it.

Transportation pricing in the Northwest is essentially the same thing. Insurance in particular. The risk of getting in an accident is pretty closely related to whether you're driving or not. But how much we pay for insurance varies very, very little in proportion to how much driving we do. There is a historical reason for that. The insurance industry didn't trust odometer readings in the past. They probably shouldn't have, but new technologies make odometer tampering basically impossible, a moot issue.

Northwesterners now pay almost as much for car insurance as they pay for gasoline, but they pay it again pretty much as a fixed sum, so nobody ever thinks about "oh, I'm not going to drive this trip because of the insurance cost is too high." That's sort of a laughable concept, but it ought to be a consideration, because the risk of accident is directly proportional to the miles driven. In Texas, one insurance company has pilot tested a fancy remote sensing system so that car insurance customers pay by the mile for insurance. In British Columbia, the Insurance Corporation of British Columbia has done research, at least, on charging folks by the mile for their car insurance. Basically you would just report how many miles you do. Now this is really obscure stuff about insurance regulations. Someone...there's one person in this room that's thinking right now...I can see it on her face, "What on earth is he talking to me about insurance regulations for? This is the Puget Sound Research Conference. You know, we're supposed to be..."

If we made the one change in state legislation to allow insurance companies to sell insurance by the mile, rather than by the vehicle year (which is written in statute at this moment) if we made that one change, then odds are the whole insurance market would flip, first one company would offer it as an option, then some other companies would start offering it as an option. There's a huge profit center right now in low mileage drivers who are being overcharged. All of us responsible greenies, who try not to use our cars and live in compact walkable neighborhoods, are paying through the nose and subsidizing folks who live in less walkable communities. Gradually, as that profit center disappears, insurance rates go up in the general pool, driving more folks to opt into the pay-by-the-mile plan and again the rates have to go up for the general pool. Ultimately, most folks move into the pay-by-the-mile insurance plan, and the result is that driving drops. This is just based on economic models; you can't really trust those, but best estimates are about 10-percent reduction in driving, and no one is paying anything more than they were in the first place.

Now if any of you have had the misfortune of being exposed to transportation planning, you will know that a 10 percent reduction in driving is basically unheard of. That doesn't happen. You can spend billions and billions of dollars on new busses and light rail lines and subway systems and high-speed trains and everything else and you might get a few percent reduction in driving. But switching the way we pay for insurance can give us about 10 percent.

I spent approximately four times as much time on that as I had allocated, so I'm not going to tell you about any more Aikido techniques, and you don't care? Alright, I'm going to tell you about a couple of other ones.

Second example. In Aikido there is a category of techniques called rear techniques. The idea is expanding the range of senses so that you are prepared for anything; so that if someone is attacking you from behind you can deal with it because you're so alert to what's going on. Ecologically, the political equivalent of that is expanding our awareness of the consequences of our decisions. A huge share of the issues that we run up against are the side effects of accumulating millions of people doing things that are really not that big a deal. But you add it up, after awhile it turns into a lot of contaminated sediment, to use an example from a session that I went to this morning. Aikido politics would be to monitor the health of living systems and make that monitoring the report card for our public agencies and, for that matter, our elected officials. We do a pretty good job of monitoring chemical quality, we do a pretty poor job of monitoring biological health. But ultimately, that's what we care about: biological health and, of course, human health. If we can make biological monitoring the report card, the judgment point, for our ecological restoration and ecosystem management systems, then we will gradually re-orient a whole lot of activities that are already

going on. And we will have a system by which to hold ourselves accountable, because consequences will no longer be hidden.

Third example. Aikido talks a lot about breath—the universal force of life. Well, in the Northwest we have to say that the universal force of life—as in, the growing numbers of us—is a critical issue. Most of the growth in numbers of us is from people moving into the Northwest, as opposed to births. But still close to a third is from Northwesterners having kids, and I don't want to touch population control. I think folks choose how many kids to have without very much consideration about the global environmental future. But about a third of births in the Northwest are the result of unintended pregnancies, accidental pregnancies. Not because two people decided, "let's have a baby," but because two people failed to take actions to prevent having a baby. So here is this opportunity. Right, well you know there's contraception, there is family planning, there's all kinds of good programs. But two-and-a-half years ago now here in western Washington some organizations demonstrated what I think is a beautiful example of a breath power technique. I guess I didn't explain what a breath power technique is. Anyway, next time I do this to an audience I'll explain what a breath power technique is. We're almost out of time, so, you don't need to know.

Listen, a group called Program for Alternative Technology in Health, along with the Washington State Health Department—I think some folks from there might even be here today, probably not the shellfish branch, but the other folks—decided to do basically a marketing program for an off-the-shelf technology that had been around for 30 years, called emergency contraception, also known as the morning-after pill, because exceedingly few doctors or women or their male partners were using this technique (though its been around for a long time, and been proven that if emergency contraception is taken within 72 hours of unprotected intercourse it's about 80 percent effective at preventing pregnancy). But almost nobody was using it. So a simple marketing campaign that let folks know about it and then connected pharmacists up through an already existing program that allowed them to write prescriptions for certain medicines and adding this emergency contraception to the list, increased something like sixtyfold the number of prescriptions for emergency contraception, for the morning after pill, within the space of a few months. This is now the model program that's being emulated all over the country and, in fact, I most recently heard about it from South Africa. B.C. has since adopted this, so that 800 pharmacies in the province of B.C. allow women without a prescription going in to get emergency contraceptive pills. In eastern Washington the program is about to be rolled out. Oregon is trying to figure out how to do it, but without success so far. And even in western Washington, where it was launched, only 800-900 pharmacies do the program. This emergency contraception program has apparently been hundreds probably at least hundreds and very likely thousands of avoided unintended pregnancies per year. Spread that out over time and with the way that demographic trends compound, and you'll see that on the 50 year of a 100-year time line this may be up there towards the top of the list of the most important changes that we're making for environmental quality long term. And it has nothing to do with almost any of us in this room.

So some of the Aikido techniques won't appear to be environmental at all. Let me quickly wrap up, so we can save a little bit of time for you to correct me and badger me and question me and so on. So that's lots of different little moves, changes. Aikido moves that each of which is promising in itself, those of you in this room could probably...between you could come up with a whole lot more than we have identified in this book that is coming out next month. None of them by themselves is enough. It's only in their combination, identifying the sets of changes that are complementary that we can really turn the tide, transform this enormously productive and prolific economy into something that can last indefinitely.

But if we do combine them the way that Aikido masters do it, then the potential is unbelievable. I don't know if any of you have ever seen films of Aikido masters where they take on six, eight, 10 big burley opponents, and render them harmless. The central technique of Aikido is having the right kind of stance. That is, a physical and mental state that is profoundly relaxed, but charged with energy, with readiness, attentiveness to the surroundings, so that you can be aware and ready when your opening is there to make the change. It's also a stance that is based in love and not fear. That's apparently the hardest part of really mastering Aikido—developing the right kind of stance. Is there is analogous stance for Aikido politics for sustainability? I think there is.

Puget Sound Research 2001

One of the very first folks to describe leverage was Archimedes, a Greek mathematician and philosopher about 23 centuries ago. He said, "Give me a place so stand, and I will move the earth." And of course he wasn't just bragging. What he meant was, if he had a long enough lever and an immovable place—one fixed point, one place to stand—then in a universe where no object is fixed, you could move almost anything; you could literally move the planet. Well I think we in the Northwest have a place to stand: this, our homeland. And if we practice leverage by figuring out what the leverage points are, we can move the earth by setting an example that change is possible, indeed it's fun, that each step along the way brings rewards of its own, and that in the end we can transform an economy that's materially productive into one that's also durable.

When I was still based in Washington D.C., I was on a trip in the Philippines and I sat, at the end of the day, interviewing members of a tribal groups in the Philippines about their struggles to protect their land against loggers and military forces and so on. I was sitting with this old woman who was a traditional priestess of this community and interviewing her about the history of the place, and at a certain point of the interview she stopped me and she asked me through the interpreter, this barefoot old woman, you know, losing her teeth, very few material possessions, she said, "Now tell me about your home land. Tell me about your place." And I didn't know what to say. At the time I lived in a suburb outside of Washington D.C. and I basically used it as a base camp to travel off to far away places. And in the end I said, "In America we don't really have places. We have careers." And she looked at me with this kind of pity in her eye. This barefoot old peasant woman in the Philippines, pitying me. Even my nonprofit salary was probably the combined annual income of her entire village. The resources that I had used flying to the Philippines on the airplane were probably what her whole village used in 10 years, in fossil fuels. She was pitying me, though, and that was the experience that ultimately drove me to leave Washington, D.C., and come back to the Northwest, a place that I felt connected to at a level that was sort of deeper than words, deeper than education.

So I have now dedicated myself to this place, and to me that feels something like an Aikido stance. A place to stand on, a place that Archimedes was talking about. So my dream, which I will leave you with, is that someday our place will have a visit from some great-grand child of that old woman from the Philippines and that some of our descendants will sit under a tree with them, one of our magnificent trees near a body of water that is again full of salmon, a restored, healthy body of water, and will listen to those descendants of ours describe how we brought about the changes in this place. A future or a place that by then would have replaced sprawl and malls, with compact, vibrant communities; places where cars are an accessory to life and not its organizing principle; communities with crisp edges, from which ecologically sound farms, forests, and fisheries spread; a place that has made radical improvements in the efficiency with which it used natural resources so that Northwesterners no longer consume their body weight in natural resources every day, but maybe only a quarter of their body weight every day and that those resources are gathered in sustainable fashion. That by that time the Puget Sound Research Conference report will be all good news, the conference proceedings will be descriptions, scientifically responsible, fully footnoted, using good methodology, of a place that has recovered and is a model for the world.

Thank you.

If anybody wants to say something there's two mikes over there. And if you stand over there you won't be able to hit me.

Question: How do you keep people willing to pay when you get out of the crisis mode? You know if there is a crisis and people's health is at risk, then they'll pay. You're suggesting we need to get beyond that, that we need to pay for health and for keeping it healthy.

Durning: I'm not suggesting that the people should pay more than they do. We pay wrongly. Take a different example. About a third of dollars flowing through the regional economy are siphoned into government, either at the local level, the state level or the federal level for different programs. We've got a probably 12- or 15-million word tax code in the region, again counting the federal, state and local level and the provincial and federal levels in Canada to the north. And each of those taxes send signals, right, when you tax something you get less of it. Well we tax people for earning incomes, for working, for investing,

for starting and operating businesses, for engaging in commerce, and for improving their buildings. We do not tax or in many ways we subsidize folks for emitting pollution, depleting natural resources, and disrupting habitats. Over the next 10 years, gradually, Aikido-like, we could shift some of the taxes off of things we want more of and onto things we want less of. The net effect is that we're still taking roughly the same amount of the economy to support the public sector goals or to support public sector activities, but people are paying taxes for different things. I see that as a political challenge, to bring about each of those steps, but I don't see it ultimately as a matter of keeping folks willing to pay where the assumption is that they are sacrificing more. We're already sacrificing a lot. We're sacrificing with our health. We're sacrificing with the degradation of our homeland. I'm not sure I understood your question right, but I answered the one I understood.

Q: Hi, thanks for that tip on insurance, I use a bicycle and try to avoid my car, but this question came up during a conversation last night about lifestyle, and I'm a student in an environmental studies program, and I want to know how to get my utility company to remove the negative incentive that they built into the utility bill structure. I use very little electricity but yet my utilities cost is very high because of the base charge and the same for water. What I water my garden with, I get charged a higher sewage rate, because they think I'm putting it in the sewer and also I use very little garbage can space, maybe only one pickup every three weeks. I could manage, but the way that they've got it set up is that I fill up my garbage can with things that shouldn't go into the landfill because I want to feel like I'm getting my money's worth, and so anyway, how can we get the utility companies to reward me for not producing garbage and consuming electricity and having a garden and not sewer the water?

Durning: Where do you live?

Q: Port Angeles

Durning: Okay, good question, and each of those is sort of a separate question. We did a survey this past summer about how folks pay for water, for domestic water, for household water use in the Northwest and it's astonishing. In most of the big cities now folks pay by the unit, but everyone pays a base charge. But there is still huge shares of the suburbs and of rural areas, especially in British Columbia, where you pay a flat fee for water. There is no incentive to conserve at all, you could turn on all of your faucets and just leave them running. Your bill wouldn't go up at all. And apparently the gardeners in Victoria, with their famous roses, have been resisting suggestions that folks should actually pay for how much they use of water, so even getting to the situation that you describe in Port Angeles would mark an improvement, but ultimately, yeah, we ought to have the people pay for how much they use. In all three of those categories in the Seattle example of solid waste is not held up all over the country as an example of how to do it. Institute recycling and at the same time charge by different sizes of trash cans. But in your case even the smallest can in Seattle would be too big.

Comment: Thank you very much for that great presentation, it strikes me that you might have come up with the ultimate political mechanism or strategy for the Northwest, which is the ultimate passive-aggressive strategy. I think that it addresses or maybe it offers a partial solution at least to what I see as the biggest political problem that we have in addressing our resource issues here in the Northwest and that is the conflict between the best available science and the best available political science. I encounter this all the time when I am trying to discuss resource issues and development and situations where I have an opportunity to try to shape policy, and I see the best available political sciences comes down to Let's Make a Deal. And the problem is when we address issues like salmon is, if there is a certain temperature that the salmon need to reach in a stream or has been identified by the best available science, best available political science would be, well, can it be two degrees warmer? And this is a real conflict and maybe you are offering us some techniques that can help us get around that by not taking those arguments straight on but finding ways to deflect them.

Durning: I hope so. I didn't hear a question in there that I can definitively answer. So I'll deflect it and turn it to my advantage, by thanking you again for your attention during your lunch break. I hope that I haven't done a disservice to your digestion. And again I would look forward to your reactions to the full list of ideas that will be out at the end of March. Thanks.